

**Information for parents:  
In the wake of a shooting or suicide of a student at their child's school**

Your child's school has your child's best interests in mind as they decide how to implement a helpful response to a tragic event. Your community also has mental health organizations and individual mental health professionals that are equally concerned for the welfare of your child and its residents.

You should carefully consider all that may be offered to your child in the immediate and long-term wake of a tragic event, even if it may seem that your child was less affected by the event than his or her peers. You should also consider attending and participating in school and community meetings formed to address the tragic event and support efforts to prevent a recurring tragedy.

**Attitudes and behaviors that should be a red flag to you if any of these seem present in your teen in the wake of a tragic death:**

- Excessive guilt or shame
- Persistent sleep difficulties
- Social withdrawal
- A noticeable loss of interest in things previous enjoyed
- Feeling hopeless about feeling, or functioning, better in the future
- Negative changes in relationship with parents/siblings
- Excessive absences from school
- Academic underperformance
- Excessive weight gain/loss
- Substance abuse
- Disruptive behavior at school or in the community
- Symptoms of excessive anxiety or PTSD
- Self-injurious behavior
- Persistent thoughts of death
- Suicidal thoughts
- Access to a firearm
- Non-compliance with outside counseling (if that was recommended)

**Actions parents should avoid:**

Don't deny or minimize the seriousness of the event, patronize, shrug off your teen's feelings, or tell him/her not to think or talk about it. The death of a friend in the teen years is a major event in the life of any teen. If your teen tells you to leave them alone, don't fully withdraw, instead remain available but in a non-hovering manner. Furthermore, avoid making any major changes in the normal activities and routines of your household.

**Actions parents should take:**

Be physically present, show warmth, be patient, allow your teen to talk about what happened, listen carefully, find out what they thought about the death event, acknowledge their feelings, show an understanding of what happened, give reasonable reassurance and follow through on promises and agreements made.

Teens will try to make some sense of what seems like a senseless act. It's important for them to come to a reasonable resolution about the event. When a tragic event happens people will sometimes develop a changed view of themselves or the world.

- Did your teen's views change?
- What are their views at the present time? Are they sensible? Do you agree?
- Does your teen feel positive and optimistic about their future, or do they feel otherwise?

Carefully challenge any negative conclusions they may have about themselves and/or the world. Being more cautious is okay. Try to tease out and sincerely reinforce any positive views and positive conclusions your teen may have about the event.

Encourage and support your teen's return to the activities they enjoyed doing before the death event. However, be patient with this transition as a premature return to such activities while your teen is still feeling overwhelmed with negative emotions can cause him or her to indefinitely reject an activity that is healthy and beneficial.

In the event of a homicide, it is common for the survivors to be filled with anger and thoughts of revenge. While acknowledging their anger and other negative emotions, your teen should be helped to realize that it is the job of the police and courts to address issues of justice and retribution and that they should confine their energies to socially constructive, non-violent activities.

Whether the death was due to a homicide or suicide, your teen may now be inspired to promote a cause or activity that; would help prevent a preventable death, is something that their deceased friend or classmate would have benefited from, liked or supported, would make the community a better place to live in, or honor (yet not idealize) their deceased friend or classmate. Show or lend your support to that positive cause or activity.

**A few necessary words of caution:**

Established research shows that the death of a friend or classmate by suicide increases the risk of suicide among the deceased student's friends and others at the same school. If you have any concerns about your teen with respect to suicide consider The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255. The Crisis Text Line provides free, 24/7 crisis support from a trained counselor by texting HOME to 741741. The use of a firearm is the most deadly and irreversible method of committing suicide. If you or your spouse own a firearm make sure it is locked up or otherwise completely inaccessible to your teen for as long as he or she is living in your home!

If you have other concerns about how your teen is adjusting to the death event don't hesitate to contact (or recontact) a school psychologist, school social worker, or guidance counselor in your teen's school, or a mental health professional in your community.